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## A miracle on stony ground



**New Zealand growers are starting to market their wine by 'terroir' and showing the French how it's done, says Richard Neill**

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WHEN it comes to the fine art of marketing dirt, the French are undisputed champions of pedological spin.

Give one of their vigneronns a patch of land and a bunch of vines, and you can guarantee he'll turn what might seem like an average piece of eroded bedrock into some sort of mystical, earthly life force. The name for this little "stars in their soil" trick is terroir, and when practised (sorry, marketed) carefully, it has been known miraculously to convert vin ordinaire into vin extraordinaire.

Until now, the New World has thankfully not been tempted to try a similar sales pitch. Winemakers in the southern hemisphere have been far too busy building brands to bother getting bogged down in a quagmire of soil-based science. Mention the phrase gout de terroir to an Aussie, and the most likely response you'll get is, "I'd rather my wine tasted of fruit than a pile of dirt."

But there are signs that this attitude is changing. Now that they've realised that "fun and fruit" gets you supermarket listings but not a place in the collector's cellar, a growing number of New World winemakers has decided it's time to get a lot more serious about dirt. In fact, in a corner of south Australia, they've got so serious about it that lawyers have had to be brought in to sort out who is on and who is off a cigar-shaped piece of terra-rossa soil known as Coonawarra.

And now New Zealanders have joined the soil-selling party. In a move that could trigger a whole new trend in New World wine marketing, a bunch of Kiwis have set up their own appellation based on a specific patch of gravelly soils in an area of river deposits in the Hawkes Bay region of the North Island. Having come up with a snappy brand name -

Gimlett Gravels - they hired a top PR agency to launch it, found sponsors to support it, and set up a website ([www.gimlettgravels.com](http://www.gimlettgravels.com)) to promote it.

Not only is this the first New World appellation defined according to a tightly specified soil type (Coonawarra looks as if it will ultimately be defined by politics, not dirt), but it is by far the most clinically commercial form of terroir-based wine marketing ever seen. They've even sent out laser-etched pieces of gravel to all the wine critics, a move that I hope will not trigger a landslide of competing rocks and stones through the post.

The story of Gimlett Gravels is a classic tale of neglected land, brave pioneers and happy award-winning endings. It is a tale of gritty determination and the inextinguishable belief of a small group of people who are convinced that an unknown patch of land at the bottom of the world will eventually make wine as good as the best from the Medoc.

Until recently, most of the vineyards in the Hawkes Bay region have been planted on the fertile Heretaunga Plains, whose rich soils are not ideal for growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Traditionally, the grapes here have ripened fully only in hotter than average years, and the winemakers have faced a constant battle to make red wines without green herbaceous flavours.

Step in winemaker Chris Pask, who regularly flew over the area in his private plane, and who noticed (back in the late 1970s) an area of barren shingle close to the Ngaruroro River. This tract of gravel was considered to be the least productive land in the area. You needed at least three acres of it to support one sheep, and, apart from a drag-racing circuit and a few warehouses, the only people interested in these river terraces were the concrete manufacturers who mined the gravel.

But Pask had a hunch that these stones - a bit like the heat-retaining pebbles found in the southern Rhone - would act like miniature ovens and so ripen the grapes reliably every year. In 1981, he bought a 40-hectare plot just off Gimlett Road and, ignoring the laughter in the local pubs, planted some Cabernet.

A few other brave souls followed, but it wasn't until Pask's 1985 wine came out that ridicule turned to respect and people began to take these mad gravelistas seriously. Made in his garage using traditional techniques (ie he couldn't afford the equipment), C J Pask Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 1985 won numerous awards and put Gimlett Road on the map.

Today, these once unloved gravels support more than 540 hectares of vines and there are more than 34 wineries and grape growers in the new appellation. The price of land has gone from just NZ\$2000 (£650) an

acre in the early 1990s to NZ\$35000 (£11,500) today, and at this rate, the owners of the Fraser Shingle gravel-crushing plant might even consider planting a few vines in their car park.

But, while the name Gimlett Gravels might imply that soil (or in this case, gravel) is the key influence on the wine, sceptics argue that this is as close to hydroponics as vineyards get. Not only is irrigation essential (the vines wouldn't survive a week without it), but also the grape growers freely admit that they are using it to manipulate the quality of the grapes.

"The great terroirs of the world do not express themselves without intervention from the human hand," counters Steve Smith, chairman of the Gimlett Gravels Winegrowers' Association, who proudly talks about the "terroir manipulation" in these vineyards. "Ideally, we'd like to have the soils of the Medoc, but we don't, so we have to go to the place where the grapes will ripen best."

So could Gimlett Gravels become one of the great red wine regions of the world? With such young vines, it is too early to predict but, last year, it scored major marketing points when a Gimlett wine walked away with one of the major international wine prizes. It was that man Pask again, and this time, it was his Reserve Merlot denting Gallic pride by winning the Bordeaux and Bordeaux Blends Trophy at the International Wine Challenge.

Whatever the future holds for Gimlett Gravels, you can guarantee other winemakers in the New World are flicking through their pocket Thesauruses to find a catchy name for their terroir. Pity the poor people who find themselves on Quaternary alluvial deposits.

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